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[By Joel Dyer](#)

[letters@boulderweekly.com](#)

[lorettalohman@gmail.com](mailto:lorettalohman@gmail.com)

[loretta.lohman@colostate.edu](mailto:loretta.lohman@colostate.edu)

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Thursday, October 11, 2012

EPA vindicated on Pavillion fracking pollution tests

Pavillion groundwater tests appear to confirm earlier EPA findings on fracking

By Joel Dyer

Photo by Joel Dyer  
The EPA's deep test well, left, and a horse

When the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released its long-awaited draft report on its investigation into the groundwater contamination near Pavillion, Wyo., in 2011, the oil and gas industry knew it was in trouble. The EPA's Pavillion report was the first study to blame drinking water contamination on hydraulic fracturing, the industry's sacred cash cow. And worse for the industry, local farm and ranch families were blaming a variety of health problems on the contaminated water that was flowing from their wells. The industry's reaction to the EPA report was swift and predictable.

Oil and gas insiders from company CEOs to oil-funded university researchers blamed everything for the contamination, with the exception of fracking: naturally occurring faults, poor drilling practices such as not enough casing, bad cement jobs and unlined storage ponds.

They could explain away, albeit with logic-strained arguments, why the area well water smelled and tasted like lighter fluid. But they struggled to find an explanation for why the EPA's test wells found many of the chemicals associated with fracking in the deeper ground water aquifer.

So last November, the industry grasped at its last straw. It claimed that the EPA was incompetent, used shoddy science and had actually caused the contamination itself when it drilled its test wells. It then enlisted its political allies from Congress to the Wyoming governor's mansion to discredit the EPA and block the release of the agency's final report, which blamed fracking for the contamination and consequently would have had major ramifications for the entire nation when it came to fracking oil and gas wells. As a result of the political pressure, the EPA backed down and agreed to wait until an outside source retested the water.

The aquifer was retested earlier this year by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the results of the new test were released on Sept. 26. According to a statement released by EPA spokeswoman Alisha Johnson, the USGS test results were "generally consistent with groundwater monitoring data previously released by EPA."

In addition, experts, including hydrologist Tom Myers of Reno, Nev., who was hired by Sierra Club, Earthworks and the Natural Resources Defense Council to evaluate the USGS findings in comparison to EPA's earlier report, agree that the EPA has been vindicated and appears to have been correct in its earlier findings.

The ball is now back in the oil and gas industry's court, but it remains to be seen if it will continue to dispute the EPA and USGS findings or if the residents of the small town of Pavillion will finally be compensated for their pain and suffering.

Respond: [letters@boulderweekly.com](mailto:letters@boulderweekly.com)

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Loretta Lohman, Ph.D.  
Nonpoint Source Outreach Coordinator  
Colorado State University  
Colorado Water Institute  
3375 W. Aqueduct Avenue  
Littleton, CO 80123  
[lorettalohman@gmail.com](mailto:lorettalohman@gmail.com) [loretta.lohman@colostate.edu](mailto:loretta.lohman@colostate.edu) 303-549-3063 [www.npscolorado.com](http://www.npscolorado.com)